

## Sentence Comparison: An Activity for Teaching Style

Of the four characteristics most commonly used to evaluate writing---content (ideas), organization, conventions, and style (voice)---my colleagues on the staff development arm of the Pennsylvania Writing Assessment Advisory Committee always believed that the last was the most difficult to teach. Partly, it's because we perceived that, to quote Ben Yagota, author of *The Sound on the Page*, "Style is expressed unconsciously." How do we as writing teachers get into the unconscious minds of our students? Even today, decades after the experience, I vividly recall some of the strongest stylists among the first college freshmen I ever taught, and I still remember thinking that the best thing I could do---with respect to their voices, at least---was get out of the way.

But Yagota doesn't stop there. His full sentence is, "Style is expressed unconsciously, but shaped consciously, in revision." Moreover, he makes this cogent observation: "[Style] emerges when writers are comfortable and proficient with their tools." Here, we can assist. We can help make students aware of the ocean of linguistic resources from which good writers draw. This article suggests an easy-to-design-and-use activity that promotes that aim. I will first describe the activity and give examples, then conclude by discussing its benefits more fully.

We begin by selecting an effective sentence (or a small number of them). Then make up a less effective version of the same thought. We put both versions on an overhead or handout and have students compare and discuss them. Here is an example:

A. Give me liberty or give me death.

B. If I cannot have my individual liberty, I would rather be put to death.

While the students do not necessarily have to decide which is the better sentence, they usually enjoy doing so. In this case, we may assume that since no one would remember what Patrick Henry had said if he had chosen the B version, the A version is better, but the important goal of the activity is not to make the “right” choice but to develop students’ linguistic capacity, sensitivity, and sophistication.

One does not have to use grammatical terminology. We can rely instead on the students’ intuitive feel for what is effective. In my experience, students are quite good at this. If they are native speakers of English, they are also able to judge grammaticality intuitively---even students who do not read much. However, one *could* employ grammatical terms, noting, for example, that the A version here is a good illustration of *parallelism*, and perhaps observing the repetition of a *sentence pattern: Imperative Verb, Indirect Object, Direct Object*. The weakness of the B choice is that it takes fourteen words to say the same thing that A says in half as many. A tentative conclusion is that succinctness is a stylistic virtue.

A caveat: Judging sentences out of context is dangerous. Although we can and often do admire sentences in themselves, quite frequently we cannot fully appreciate their value unless we have background information such as the rhetorical situation and the writer’s purpose. Using sentences from essays or books the students have already read avoids this pitfall. Or, you can fill in background information, as I have done for several of the sentences below.

### **Additional Examples**

The pairs of sentences that follow have been taken from a wide range of different sources. The “better” sentence is sometimes the A version, sometimes the B. In all cases

but two, I wrote the alternative version. Often, I have kept the alternative quite close to the original, in order to focus on a specific point or two. But sometimes, as in the first illustration, I have taken a different approach. If you try this activity, you will find opportunities to teach quite a wide range of different “lessons.”

1A The immense oval of the billowing bigtop, ocean blue and about five hundred feet long and two hundred feet wide, had already been erected, with flags flapping from the five center poles.

1B The immense oval of the billowing bigtop was ocean blue and about five hundred feet long and two hundred feet wide. Circus workers had already erected it, and flags were flapping from its five center poles.

The A version comes from Edward Hoagland’s “Calliope Times,” originally published in *The New Yorker*. It features a lengthy adjectival phrase that follows the noun it modifies and a terminal absolute phrase introduced by *with*---both relatively sophisticated linguistic devices. (Again, one does not have to use these grammatical terms.) Its main verb is passive, there being no need to state who erected the tent. The B version here is (purposely) much less sophisticated than the A. It illustrates the kind of writing that might have been done by someone told to avoid passives at all costs and scared of using too many words in a single sentence.

2A My dog and I hunt, fish, walk, eat, and sleep together.

2B My dog and I do everything together. Hunt, fish, walk, eat, and sleep together.

The B version was written by an eighth grade student; the sentences are the fourth and fifth of an essay entitled “Fox.” In the NCTE convention session where I first encountered the essay---which was being used as an illustration of effective writing by

Ruth Culham and a colleague from the Northwest Regional Lab---the audience highly approved of the student's writing. To be sure, they did not necessarily approve of these two sentences, but I believe they would have. Though the A version is notably shorter, it is also pedestrian. More importantly, it is much less emphatic than the B. The writer of the latter achieves emphasis by separating off into a fragment the things the boy and dog did together, and by the repetition of *together*.

3A And the hatchet his mother had given him was on his belt, somehow still there.

3B And on his belt, somehow still there, the hatchet his mother had given him.

This item comes from Gary Paulsen's survival novel, *Hatchet*. The hero is surveying his possessions after a plane crash, and the last item he notices is the hatchet his mother had given him before the flight. The B version puts this most important discovery in the position of stress---the final position in the sentence. It also achieves greater emphasis by eliminating the (unnecessary) verb *was*. The A version is notably less emphatic.

4A Having just turned sixteen, I would soon have a car and my driver's license, plus new found freedom and independence.

4B Ah, sweet sixteen. Ahhh . . . driver's license, car, new found freedom and independence.

The B version was written by an eleventh grade student and was the opening of her response to a prompt in a state writing test. While it is fragmentary, it was strongly admired by the teachers who evaluated the essay. (The rest of the student's essay is not written in fragments.) B clearly grabs the reader's attention, which is precisely what it was intended to do. The A version does not arrest the reader.

5A My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three.

5B My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident. She was hit by lightning at a picnic when I was three.

Vladimir Nabakov is the author of the A version, an illustration of the power of the parentheses (*Lolita*). Though handbooks claim parentheses are used only to enclose “nonessential information,” the reality is that they have a wide range of effective uses. Here, the parentheses not only create stunning brevity, but they also invite readers into the passage, since the readers have to deduce where and how the mother died. The B version spells out what happened. A, in contrast, is an instance of a writer following the familiar injunction, “Show, don’t tell.”

6A E. B. White’s work was celebrated for its ease and clarity---just think of *Charlotte’s Web*---but maintaining this standard required endless attention.

6B As illustrated by *Charlotte’s Web*, E. B. White’s work was celebrated for its ease and clarity, but maintaining that standard required endless attention.

These sentences are identical in length; indeed, they are nearly identical in wording. The only significant difference is the placement of the phrase related to *Charlotte’s Web*. In writing the A version, Roger Angell followed the principle of putting the subject first---the “known/new” principle, as it is sometimes called. Angell’s version (from his introduction to the fourth edition of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*) also illustrates the power of the dash pair, a mark of punctuation used far more frequently by professional writers than any other internal mark except the comma. The

dashes make *Charlotte's Web* stand out, without significantly affecting the flow of the sentence.

7A The whole point of television is that one can switch channels. It is normal to switch channels when we become restless or bored.

7B The whole point of television is that one can switch channels, that it is normal to switch channels: to become restless, bored.

The A version is repetitious and has the feeling of starting over again at the second sentence. The B version, in contrast, is all of a piece. A beautifully hewn sentence (in my view), it has something of the economy of good poetry. The comma after *channels* might seem a comma splice at first glance, but it elegantly replaces *and*. Notice also the creative use of a colon just before the last four words. B was written by Susan Sontag in an essay published in *The New Yorker*.

8A. In June 1938, Virginia Woolf published *Three Guineas*, her brave, unwelcomed reflections on the roots of war.

8B. Virginia Woolf published *Three Guineas*, which was her brave, unwelcomed reflections on the roots of war, in June 1938.

Style is all about choices, and this pair of sentences illustrates that well. Grammatically speaking, it makes no difference whether a phrase indicating time (“in June 1938”) is placed at the beginning or end of a sentence. But rhetorically, the difference can be significant. Here, the writer wanted to emphasize “the roots of war,” and she does so by ending the sentence with that phrase. (Her essay is entitled, “Looking at War.”). Had the date of publication been significant, the author might have made the opposite choice. Similarly, writers often have a choice between a *which*-clause and a

reduced *which*-clause. Sometimes, for the sake of rhythm, the writer will choose the former, but here, author Susan Sontag made the more *economical* of the two choices, deleting *which was*.

9A Power turns white with terror, imagines its enemies are black, and invents race, when it confronts the inevitability of change.

9B Power pales (turns white with terror---imagines its enemies black---invents race) when power confronts the inevitability of change.

The author of the B version is John Edgar Wideman, as inventive a stylist as any nonfiction writer I know. I have already spoken of the value of parentheses and dashes; Wideman uses both powerfully in the same handful of words. In one sense, parentheses permit us to “skip over” the words they enclose, allowing the retention of the force of the core sentence: “Power pales when power confronts the inevitability of change.” (I like the repetition of *power*, too, but the issue of when repetition is effective and when it is not is difficult to teach.) In Wideman’s enclosed material, note how the dashes reinforce the parallelism.

10A The grandmother didn’t want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee.

10B Granny didn’t want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her friends and relatives in east Tennessee.

Flannery O’Connor wrote *both* of these sentences. B is an earlier version of A, which is the opening of “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” I speculate that she made the change when she discovered how she was going to use the grandmother, what fate would befall her. Students who do not know the short story can nevertheless discuss the effect

of the change from *Granny* to *the* grandmother. The little word *the* distances us from the character, makes her much more impersonal than *Granny* did. When we learn in the ensuing sentence that this woman has *connections* in east Tennessee (rather than friends and relatives), we may be distanced still further, which is precisely the effect that O’Conner wanted.

## **Conclusion**

Several of my illustrations are from the 2001 or 2003 anthology of *Best American Essays*. It is impossible to read such a collection without being *struck* by the fact that its authors employ an exceptionally broad range of linguistic devices. This fact reinforces beliefs that I have long held; namely, that not only our best writers, but also our best student writers, are those with the greatest number of linguistic “tools” at their disposal, and that a wide variety of structures---including marks of punctuation---ought to be part of *every* student writer’s inventory. Indeed, I propose the following as a standard fit for all states to adopt: “Students are able to make effective use of a wide range of linguistic resources.” A potential benefit of the sentence-comparing activity is that it will help make students more conscious of what these resources are. (*Reading* a rich store of good literature will make them unconsciously aware of the same thing, and that is another characteristic of our best writers: they read a great deal.) Imitating the better sentences is an excellent follow-up activity to the sentence-comparison technique.

Readers will have noticed that some of the better sentences among my illustrations break, or at least bend, commonly taught rules. This is not accidental.



“Style,” as Buffon famously remarked, “is the man himself,” and if we all talked or wrote the same way, there would be no individuality. In closing, I offer this extended analogy:

Conventions: Conformity : : Style: Individuality

Put another way, a tension often exists between conventions and style, and while it is important for students to learn rules, it is also important that they have the freedom to break them, whether they do so consciously or not.

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